JJQ

Catechistics, or, Where was Moses When the Candle Went Out: Q, A, and Hospitality in "Ithaca"

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"Ithaca" is, of course, the homecoming of *Ulysses*, the episode in which Bloom arrives home—and yet it is to a home that is no longer quite as it was. Even the furniture has been moved. It is the episode of friendship, where Bloom is eager host to a sobering Stephen—and yet the younger man keeps his distance (even singing his host an old anti-Semitic song); and there is little suggestion that the two will meet again except, again, by accident. It is also the episode of decision, because at last Bloom has to face Molly and start the rest of their life together, however long it may last. It is a decision, however, that does not so much get made as turn into the realization that there might, after all, be nothing to decide. And "Ithaca" is in the place in a narrative where one would expect a resolution: the working out of a strictly narrative logic. Yet of all the episodes, it is the one whose technique draws most flagrantly on a thoroughly non-narrative genre, the catechism. *This*—but *that*; *that*—but *this*. It is at this "but" where all sorts of things intersect and invert—friendship, hospitality, narration, and catechism—that this essay is situated.

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What selfimposed enigma did Bloom about to rise in order to go so as to conclude lest he should not conclude involuntarily apprehend?

The cause of a brief sharp unforeseen heard loud lone crack emitted by the insentient material of a strainveined timber table.

What selfinvolved enigma did Bloom risen, going, gathering multicoloured multiform multitudinous garments, voluntarily apprehending, not comprehend?

Who was M'Intosh?

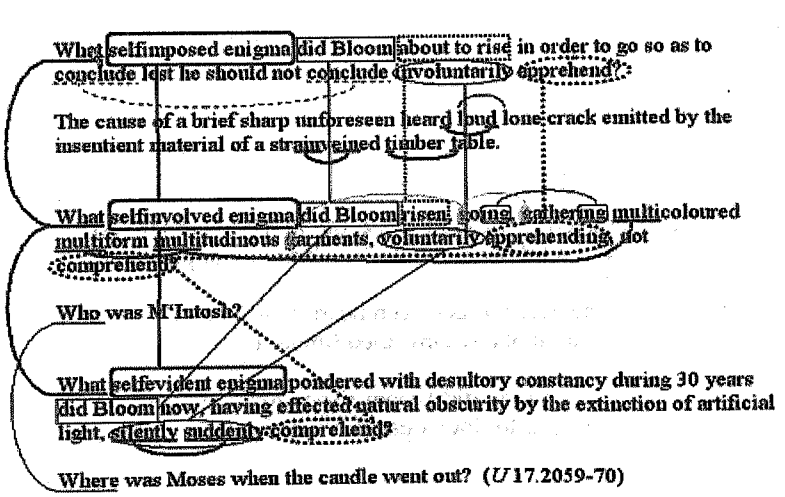
What selfevident enigma pondered with desultory constancy during 30 years did Bloom now, having effected natural obscurity by the extinction of artificial light, silently suddenly comprehend?

Where was Moses when the candle went out? (*U* 17.2059-70)

Stephen has left. Bloom is alone. He cannot put off any longer the moment of going upstairs to Molly. This is the moment so many things have been leading to across this very long, unprecedented day, the decision the whole day has been both returning to and putting off. He is about to rise—and the furniture cracks.

Something arrives, seemingly out of nowhere, uncalled for and involuntarily apprehended. Odysseus strings the great bow with which he will kill the suitors. There is a thundercrack overhead. Odysseus laughs in recognition of the omen from Zeus. Perhaps there is a secret signature of a god in this noise. In that case, it balances quite precisely that other intruding noise we heard earlier, the shout in the street in "Nestor" (which the *Ulysses* schema in Stuart Gilbert's *James Joyce's "Ulysses"* also labels a catechism[1]). It too is signed by a god's name: that "Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!" (*U* 2.384) has nestled within it the tetragrammaton YHWH. These two catechisms, the personal and the impersonal, interrogate and call out to—catechise—each other across the vast distance of the text: Q and A.

Or rather three things arrive out of nowhere: that loud lone crack and two questions. These are the only two occasions on which "Ithaca" answers a question with a question, and they are tied to that omen of the crack by careful and multiple verbal repetitions:



So who was M'Intosh anyway? The question has not bothered Bloom since he read the report of the funeral in the *Telegraph* an hour or so earlier in the cabman's shelter, and then it was only one of a number of errors—including "C. P. M'Coy and Stephen Dedalus B. A. who were conspicuous, needless to say, by their total absence," and the misspelling of his own name as "L. Boom," which "[n]ettled [him] not a little" but "tickled [him] to death simultaneously" (*U* 16.1263-65, 1262, 1263). Now, out of nowhere, the question arises. It is a "selfinvolved" enigma because the misunderstanding began with something he said.

> —And tell us, Hynes said, do you know that fellow in the, fellow was over there in the ...
>
> He looked around.
>
> —Macintosh. Yes, I saw him, Mr Bloom said. Where is he now?
>
> —M'Intosh, Hynes said, scribbling, I don't know who he is. Is that his name?
>
> He moved away, looking about him.
>
> —No, Mr Bloom began, turning and stopping. I say, Hynes!
>
> Didn't hear. What? Where has he disappeared to? Not a sign. Well of all the. Has anybody here seen? Kay ee double ell. Become invisible. Good Lord, what became of him? (*U* 6.891-901)

Crack. Something nags at Bloom as he is about to rise and go upstairs; something that involves him and that he even unwittingly set in motion nevertheless continues to escape him, heading off on a tangent of its own.[2]

And where was Moses when the light went out? Bloom has been puzzling over that one for ages, thirty years it would seem, and suddenly, just when he has turned off the light, he is no longer in the dark. The answer comes as if out of nowhere, with no conscious process of thought behind it: unheralded, unsought, quite gratuitous, it is a small and almost meaningless gift. Crack: the penny drops. As improbable and banal as the return of the notched coin Bloom set adrift some six years ago "for circulation on the waters of civic finance," the riddle falls due (*U* 17.983-84).[3]

Crack. Something arrives, and with it, two questions, one of them about something lacking, the other about something excessive. Something that should be there, or that Bloom wants to be there, is not, and something that was not there and was not even sought after any more suddenly *is* there, has happened behind his back. Something that should be Bloom is not; something else that is not Bloom is. Too much and too little. A door of egress and a door of ingress (*U* 17.1034): a crack in the circle, which, at this point, both opens out and closes in on itself, at one and the same time. Someone goes out, and the cat comes in (*U* 17.1034-35).

The Gilbert schema's symbol for "Ithaca" is "comets" (30), and the comet—as Bloom has no doubt read in Sir Robert Ball's *The Story of the Heavens*,[4] sitting there in its blue covers on his bookshelf (*U* 17.1373)—has two possible trajectories. One is the ellipse, like the orbit of the planets, only elongated by the greater distance between the two foci; the other is the parabola, where that distance becomes infinite. In one, the comet returns; in the other, it does not. Are these years, even centuries, between returns, or has the comet already swept off into interstellar space, lost to the sun's gravity? Which trajectory is the coin on? It has only been six years, after all, and it took brave Odysseus twenty and a simple riddle about Moses thirty.

As John Gordon has pointed out, "Ithaca" is full of "C"s, that figure of the incomplete circle and the bow of Odysseus, to a degree that is "way off the bell curve."[5] In effect, I have been listing some of them: "comet," "coin" (notched edge and all), "crack" (the unexpected event, the break in the circle), maybe the "cat," perhaps even that inverted apostrophe of "M'Intosh" that stands for a "c" and that one always has to trick one's word processor into getting the right way round. It is hard to know where to stop, because one of the things involved in this episode is, precisely, the limits of "coincidence"—a "c" whose four occurrences in "Ithaca" would need another occasion to unravel, bearing so directly as they do on the meeting of Bloom and Stephen, and the question of paternity (*U* 17.323, 17.633, 17.635, 17.639). But certainly "catechism."

At this point, let us change gear.

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For Mikhail M. Bakhtin, paragraphing marks a dialogism: "Were we to probe deeper into the linguistic nature of paragraphs, we would surely find that in certain crucial respects paragraphs are analogous to exchanges in dialogue. The paragraph is something like a vitiated dialogue worked into the body of a monologic utterance."[6] Between one block of text and another, something alters, backtracks, begins again or leaps ahead, comes at it from another angle.

In *Marxism and the Theory of Language*, this dialogism is very much a matter of orientation towards the reader or shifts in a speaker's attention or intention, such as a reflection on or redirection of the utterances that have gone before. Throughout *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the dialogic swerves of free indirect discourse take place in an *interpersonal* space between two or more consciousnesses, be they of characters or narrators:

> a dialogic approach is possible towards any signifying part of an utterance, even towards an individual word, if that word is perceived not

> as the impersonal word of language but as a sign of someone else's semantic position, as the representative of *another person's utterance;* that is, if we can hear in it someone else's voice. Thus dialogic relations can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as *two voices collide within it* dialogically.[7] (my italics)

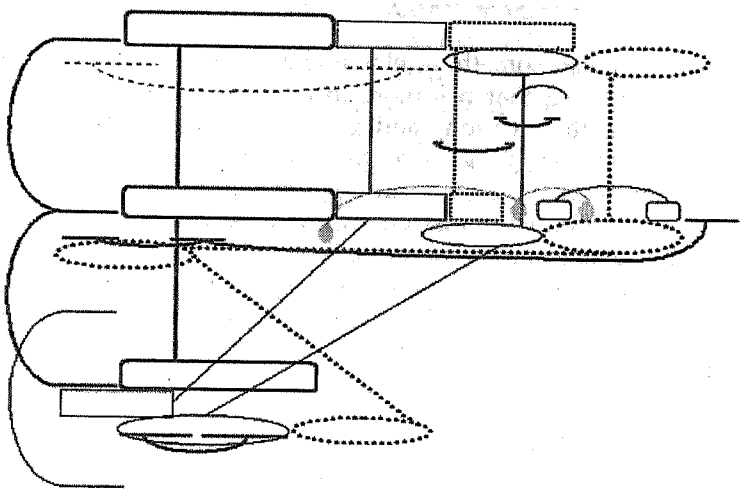
Readers, speakers, consciousnesses, and the interpersonal space between them: whichever way you look at it, Bakhtin begins with voices.

But there is also something else going on in that passage from "Ithaca," something that has more to do with furniture and coincidence than with intentions and voices. As Hugh Kenner points out in *A Homemade World,* with the modernist text in particular, and certainly with Joyce, "no uttering voice need be specified, nor unified. (Who asks, who answers in grave polysyllables, the questions in the seventeenth section of *Ulysses*?)."[8] The furniture cracks; nobody is saying anything to anyone, and yet it is already call and response, both at once, a call demanding response and a response to a call: "Enough delay, you can't put it off any more, get upstairs, Bloom; that's what you wanted to hear, isn't it?" Prior to any content, unchanged by any content that may be poured into it, there is already the bare form of exchange. Q and A: a catechism in which answers call forth even more questions and where it may not even be quite clear which is the answer and which the question. At the heart of the text, any text, before there are voices or even anything to say, there is an empty space crisscrossed by the arcs of call and response, like the trajectories of comets.

This empty, inhuman, but endlessly traversed space is figured everywhere in "Ithaca" and in all sorts of ways. Most obviously, it is the night sky under which Bloom and Stephen piss and part, that "heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit" (*U* 17.1039), which hangs over Bloom's meditations on the very large and the very small. But it is also the careful typography restored by Hans Walter Gabler, in which both question and answer and one set of Q and A and the next are separated by differential blank spaces, across which, and indeed across the entire vast extent of the book, a hubbub of echoes call to each other. Michael Groden and Gabler both suggest that with the exigencies of approaching publication, "Ithaca" was, in many cases, the only possible place to put new expository material; rather than be placed in the earlier episodes, which had already been printed, new material tended to find its way into "Ithaca" and "Penelope," from where it calls out and back to the earlier episodes.[9] And that space is also figured in those dizzying lists, constellations in which each individual element is a star hung separately and clustering against the text: water's "universality," "democratic equality,"

"vastness," "unplumbed profundity," "restlessness," "hydrostatic quiescence," "multisecular stability," "luteofulvous bed," and so forth (see *U* 17.185, 186, 188, 190, 195, 196).

But even before they are this content or that, these echoes are words, sounds, rhymes, syntactic shapes of sentences, rhythms, and the sheer facticity of repetition:



Before there are discernible voices, the intricate syntactic and verbal balance is already eliciting repetition and response. This is an empty and prehuman space. It is not yet a conversation between two anthropomorphic narrators or narrative voices but a preindividual, impersonal space across which sounds, rhythms, patterns are calling out to each other—even, as Gordon points out, the shapes of letters. To read "Ithaca" is constantly to be waylaid by these empty, asignifying differences and the rhythms of their transpositions and parallels. To read the episode with students who are new to the book is to come face to face, all over again, with the extraordinary way in which comprehension of what is narrated can be hijacked at every turn by the echoes and transpositions of the telling, as gesture signals to gesture and response calls forth response.

> the natural grammatical transition by inversion involving no alteration of sense of an aorist preterite proposition (parsed as masculine subject, monosyllabic onomatopoeic transitive verb with direct feminine object) from the active voice into its correlative aorist preterite proposition (parsed as feminine subject, auxiliary verb and quasimonosyllabic onomatopoeic past participle with complementary masculine agent) in the passive voice. (*U* 17.2217-23)

Only on top of and across this space of echoes does the rhythm of other, more personal exchanges take shape.

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In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as everyone knows, the third-person usage means that the narration is never quite identifiable with Stephen, even as it never relaxes its focus on him: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo" (*P* 7). The effect is of a language that is not the infant Stephen's but comes from elsewhere to wash over and around and above and beyond him. Or rather, for a line or two here at the beginning of the story, there is no Stephen; there are only the sentence and the story that have not yet reached the place that is already there for him. Like the moocow, the story will have already come down along the road a way before meeting baby tuckoo. It is easy to multiply examples. The infant Stephen's fascination with rhyme and rhythm, the generation of doggerel by footsteps (*"The ivy whines upon the wall/And whines and twines upon the wall"*—*P* 179), the function of rhythm in the young artist's aesthetic are all cases where language never does quite coincide with the subject immersed in it, or who emerges from it, always off to one side, something more or less.[10]

What this amounts to, I argue, is that there is no narrator in *A Portrait*. "Narrator" is not a useful hypothesis in the book, any more than it is in "Ithaca": it explains nothing, as there is no personifiable agency from which the narrative comes. The story is told from somewhere always off to one side of the subject of which it speaks. This is one reason that there has to be that gap between artist and young man. It is not just that Stephen is yet to mature into the artist who can write *A Portrait*; it is more that the artist, "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*P* 215), is an empty position uninhabitable by anyone, including Joyce. It is an erasure, a disappearing act, a gap in the records.

If *A Portrait* opens up a subtle gap between narrated and narration, "Ithaca" doubles and redoubles both of those terms into exchange and catechism. If the catechistic narration is an exchange, so too is that narrated meeting and parting of Bloom and Stephen—but an exchange of quite a different sort, neither reducible to the framing catechistics nor separable from them. The exchange rate between these two exchanges is forever posing itself as a problem. Exchange itself is a question that the catechistics of "Ithaca" refuse to close. If the night sky, the typography, the lists, the exchanges of friendship are all fig-

ures of a catechistics, they nevertheless remain quite irreducible one to the other, but with all sorts of complex exchanges and traversals from one to another, like the star "precipitated with great apparent velocity across the firmament from Vega in the Lyre above the zenith beyond the stargroup of the Tress of Berenice towards the zodiacal sign of Leo" (*U* 17.1211-13).

A dialogue narrates a dialogue: Q and A about Q and A, an exchange about an exchange—or about, simply, exchange. Bloom and Stephen are talking, but the exchange between the two is not just verbal. It is everywhere you turn, in the ebb and flow of innumerable small actions and transactions: the letting-into the house, the cup of tea, the copy of *Sweets of Sin* that passes from hand to hand inscribed now with Irish, now with Hebrew characters, the shake of hands in parting—a welter of narrated exchanges that are quite different from but repeat the dense rhythmic call-and-response of the narration, in which they can sometimes seem submerged (*U* 17.731-40, 1220-23). Everything here is done and said *in mind of* someone else, even the bloodymindedness of Stephen's song; each is in the other's words and actions, just as the Q and A of the narration is endlessly *in mind of* something or somewhere else, in its constellation of responses and calls.

The two exchanges—the one that is told and the one that does the telling—oscillate across or around or beyond or behind each other, never coinciding but always *in mind of* one another. Everywhere, each element of a dialogue reaches out not only to its response or question, or even distant responses and questions, but to another dialogue altogether, to which it is quite irreducible but always *in mind. In mind of*: everywhere in "Ithaca," there is a tentative, tenuous hospitality, even if perhaps only momentary and without consequence, and even if enforced by nothing more than call and response. And this *being in mind of* guarantees nothing: it is not the confluence of two different voices that would finally achieve a synthesis but the irreducible gap between two things that are formally, structurally different—that crack that is the possibility rather than the necessity of the comet's return. The very form of the episode finds its meaning in the other, or somewhere yet to come, in the future, in a promise without guarantee. Q finds itself in A, and A in Q.

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And the dialogue between Bloom and Stephen is doubled again, in another direction, since it occupies just half of "Ithaca." Halfway through, Stephen leaves, and only on line 2113 of a total of 2331 in the Gabler edition—that is, nine tenths of the way through the episode—will Bloom get into bed with Molly, for a final, weary exchange.

Something like 40 percent of "Ithaca" is Bloom alone.

Once again, *A Portrait* is instructive. It too has its disjunction. Just pages before the end, that impersonal, refined-out-of-existence narrative gives way to Stephen's diary entries. Not only is this a disjunction like the very Q and A we have been looking at in "Ithaca"—one utterance answering to another across an empty space—but what those journal entries answer to, or are set against across that space, is nothing other than a series of questions and answers—and, what's more, questions and answers about friendship:

> —Alone, quite alone. You have no fear of that. And you know what that word means? Not only to be separate from all others but to have not even one friend.
>
> —I will take the risk, said Stephen.
>
> —And not to have any one person, Cranly said, who would be more than a friend, more even than the noblest and truest friend a man ever had.
>
> His words seemed to have struck some deep chord in his own nature. Had he spoken of himself, of himself as he was or wished to be? Stephen watched his face for some moments in silence. A cold sadness was there. He had spoken of himself, of his own loneliness which he feared.
>
> —Of whom are you speaking? Stephen asked at length.
>
> Cranly did not answer.
>
> * * *
>
> 20 *March:* Long talk with Cranly on the subject of my revolt. (*P* 247)

That impersonal narrative which always throws Stephen somewhere off-center concludes with a question that does not get an answer, which is to say it concludes without conclusion. And yet in that very silence the question gets its answer, clear and precise. Cranly's silence says all sorts of things, as silences do: things such as, possibly, "You know perfectly well of whom I am speaking, and I know you know, and you know that too. But I won't say it; I'll let the silence say it, because I need some sort of token from you, some sort of answer to my question, some acknowledgement of your friendship, and that is just what you have said you will not give." And no doubt more.

Stephen's question has been in answer to another question, the one Cranly has been pressing him with: "Do you really know the implications of what you are saying? Do you know it means this? And this?" So Stephen is not only turning the tables, turning questioner into questioned, but asking a question that is exactly about who is asking the questions and who they are really about: "Are you speaking of me, or of you? Is it my aloneness you're speaking of, or your own?" Stephen is defensive. He refuses to give Cranly the token of the answer he desires, even though he freely acknowledges that he has at other times "confess[ed] the fears that I have" (*P* 247). Just lines

before, when Cranly "pressed Stephen's arm with an elder's affection," Stephen had been "thrilled by his touch" (*P* 247). It is far from clear that the loneliness he sees Cranly fearing is not also at the same time his own, reflected in the mirror of a friend. This impersonal narration, which has been everywhere in *A Portrait* and is now just on the verge of being replaced by something else, ends in a knot: Stephen in Cranly, Cranly in Stephen. It is a friendship perhaps, but a friendship across distances and silences that faces separation.

That final question, however, receives an answer in another way as well. In place of the answer, we have Stephen's diary; in place of dialogue, monologue; in place of that Q and A in which Cranly questions Stephen about being alone, Stephen alone. One common way of reading the diary is as the signal of a break with what has gone before: Stephen's increasing maturity means that at last we can hear unfiltered the voice of this young man on the way to being the artist. How fitting that at this point, as an index of that maturity, the third-person narrative should for the first time become truly first-person. But if the novel eventually does reach a first-person narrative, it is a first-person that is now divided within itself, addressed out to a future "I" whose present approbation it seeks. It is Stephen trying on various vestures again, just as the villanelle is his trying on the vestures of the poet, letting him stand back and look at himself as poet, or just as in the walk across town where he has tried on "the vesture of a doubting monk" (*P* 176), or just as he has played Edmond Dantès and the proud gesture of refusal of muscatel grapes from the Mercedes who many years ago slighted his love (*P* 63). The diary is a private performance, Stephen performing for Stephen, but in front of the eyes of imagined others. "11 *April:* Read what I wrote last night. Vague words for a vague emotion. Would she like it? I think so. Then I should have to like it also" (*P* 251).

If this is a monologue, it is a knot in which others are inextricably tied. Stephen is Stephen as he always has been, through detours and reflections in others, across an empty space. Stephen's monologue, his words, are, at the end of the novel, his in precisely the sense that the song of the very first page of *A Portrait* was his: a refraction of what has come to him from elsewhere. "*O, the wild rose blossoms/On the little green place.* He sang that song. That was his song. *O, the green wothe botheth*" (*P* 7). From the outset, Stephen's monologue has been catechism: at one and the same time, a question sent out into the future for return and the response to questions already asked, already prefigured or anticipated. The change from third-person to first-person is thus considerably less of a disjunction than it at first seems. When it arrives, the first-person has already been hollowed out from within, as it were, by the off-centeredness of its third-person narrative.

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That gap which opens up from one paragraph to another, or between Q and A, or within the speech of a single voice, is not, as Bakhtin would argue, a matter of a "vitiated dialogue worked into the body of a monologic utterance." On the contrary, we have to reverse the order of things: that monologism is already hollowed out by a sort of catechistics. Dialogism has as its very possibility an indefinite openness, a coin that may or may not return. And this is the ethical dimension of "Ithaca," for that openness is nothing but an absolutely minimal but, for all that, literally endless hospitality. Against the Bakhtinian focus on the individual as the source of the utterance, the two questions we began with—Who was M'Intosh? Where was Moses when the light went out?—are the only two "Ithaca" does not so much answer as dissolve.

NOTES

A version of this paper was presented at the XVIIIth International James Joyce Symposium in Trieste, June 2002.

[1] See the *Ulysses* schema in Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's "Ulysses" A Study* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 30. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[2] As we will find out early in "Penelope," Bloom's part in Blazes Boylan's racing losses will have escaped him too, even though it returns as a small but quite unwitting piece of revenge against the cuckolder: "he was like a perfect devil for a few minutes after he came back with the stoppress tearing up the tickets and swearing blazes because he lost 20 quid he said he lost over that outsider that won and half he put on for me on account of Lenehans tip cursing him to the lowest pits that sponger" (*U* 18.423-26).

[3] That particular coin might not have returned yet, but another previously forgotten one has, and not long before: "He inserted his left hand into the left lower pocket of his waistcoat and extracted and replaced a silver coin (1 shilling), placed there (presumably) on the occasion (17 October 1903) of the interment of Mrs Emily Sinico, Sydney Parade" (*U* 17.1451-54).

[4] See Sir Robert Ball, *The Story of the Heavens* (London: Cassell and Company, 1885).

[5] John Gordon, "'Ithaca' as the Letter 'C,'" *JJQ*, 32 (Fall 1994), 45. Gordon counted the "C"s in each episode "by having my word processor program replace the 'C's with 'CX's, then subtracting the original character count from the new count" (p. 56 n2). On the average, across the entire text of *Ulysses*, about one in every fifty-seven characters is a "C." In "Ithaca," the count soars to an extraordinary one in thirty-five.

[6] V. N. Vološinov (Mikhail M. Bakhtin), *Marxism and the Theory of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), p. 111.

[7] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 184.

[8] Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. xiii.

[9] Michael Groden, *"Ulysses" in Progress* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), and Hans Walter Gabler, *U-G* (pp. 1890-91).

[10] See Tony Thwaites, *Joycean Temporalities: Debts, Promises, and Countersignatures* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2001), pp. 75-80, 120-32.